"What Every Student Should Know": General Education Requirements in Undergraduate Education

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Abstract

The present paper defines general curriculum requirements in higher education. It focuses on the history of the arguments that make up general curriculum requirements starting from the Yale Report 1828 to the recent perspectives on general curriculum. The purpose of the review is to illustrate that what defines knowledgeable person is determined by the value and the philosophy of the culture of the institution. The paper concludes with Stark's academic plan as a model universities can utilize as a check list for what ought to be included in the general curriculum requirements for undergraduate education.

Keywords: *general curriculum; Yale Report; critical pedagogy; academic plan; higher education*

In 2004, the University of Harvard announced its plan to reform its undergraduate curriculum. This reform plan includes only what is called general curriculum requirements. Lawrence Summers, former president of Harvard University, thinks that Harvard students need more courses in humanities, language, arts, and math than what they have already taken. The argument that came back from this plan revolved around the issue of what material and courses should be included under general education requirements. What every student should know is, however, an ongoing debate in which those who are responsible for curriculum development seem unable to reach a consensus. What kind of education will ensure an acceptable level of intellectual and personal development to best prepare students to be active members of their society? In every society, whether democratic or non-democratic, education aims to prepare students by furnishing them with the knowledge they need to function purposefully in their society. However, the problem, as Tierney (1989) suggests, occurs "because of competing cultural definitions of what counts for knowledge" (1989, 75). The issue that has shaped the argument about general curriculum requirements is not related to the effectiveness of the curriculum but is instead about whom we consider to be a knowledgeable person.

1. General Education Movement

General education as Harvard's committee defines it is "that part of a student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen". It refers to the courses universities assign to their students to provide them with general and basic skills that will help them succeed. The purpose of these courses is to provide students with a breadth of knowledge, study skills, thinking skills, and writing kills. The emphasis universities put on these courses reflects the institutions' philosophy, values, and culture (Warner & Koeppel, 2009).

During the 1950s different perspectives of general curriculum emerged that ranged from the traditional perspective, focusing on the role of school in society, to more individualized types of curricula that meet student needs and interests.

Walker & Soltis (1997) identified three approaches to general education that reflect the institutional academic value and the intended learning outcomes:

1) Subject-centered perspective: This perspective believes in the importance of transmitting knowledge to the next generation. This can be done through teaching basic skills, critical thinking, and learning and mastering important facts and information.

2) Society-centered perspective: This perspective holds that education should aim to create and insure a prosperous and healthy society. Consequently, civic responsibility, vocational training, ethical values, development of democratic attitude, and preparing individuals for industrialized society and for economic competence are the aim of this type of education.

3) Individual-centered perspective: This perspective emphasizes the importance of individual freedom, talent, and happiness, and preparing students for community life. Therefore, this perspective believes that schools should help each student know their own potential.

Today, the meaning of education has moved beyond the idea that an educated person is the person who knows how to read and write. These skills today are not enough to help individuals function effectively in their complex social environments. However, some believe that cultural literacy is more important than "transmitting the cultural heritage of Western civilization" (Posner, 1995). Hirsch (1987) believes that "the basic goal of education in a human community is acculturation, the transmission to children of the specific information shared by the adults of the group" (Posner, 1995). In this perspective, literacy requires more than learning skills; it requires "the early and continued transmission of specific information" without which "people are unable to communicate with one another" (Posner, 1995). In this perspective, interpersonal relationships are emphasized as important skills that the curriculum should foster to help students communicate and feel a sense of belonging in their culture.

Other schools of thoughts adopt similar beliefs on the importance of schools in connecting the curriculum to students' lives. Schools should create an environment that enables students to explore their own interests and needs and discover options by themselves. Creating close connections to what students already know and experience is very important. John Dewey argues that students come to schools with different social backgrounds, knowledge, ideas, and expectations. As a result, they expect schools to reflect on what the students have experienced in everyday life and help them to understand how to function effectively in their society. Dewey identified the failure of schools to recognize this need as "waste in education" (Dewey 1899, pp. 59-86). In his view, a child in a traditional school is unable "to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school" (Dewey, 1899, 67). The quality of any experience, Dewey argues, is evident in its effect on students' present and future actions that lead, hopefully, to their positive contribution to their society (Dewey, 1899).

2. General Education in Higher Education

Regarding general education in higher education, the earliest writing that tried to define general education can be traced back to the *Reports on the Course of Instruction in Yale College; By a Committee of the Corporation and the Academical Faculty*, otherwise known as the *Yale Report of 1828*. The *Yale Report* states that education should aim not only to teach a specific subject, but also to provide a broad understanding of everything related to life. The report also states that education should help expand the mind; it argues that limiting students to one subject will eliminate the opportunity to expand the human mind.

According to the authors of the Report, education should include three disciplines. The first discipline should enable the individual to act in an appropriate and acceptable manner without parental guardians. The second discipline aims to teach students mental discipline to help individuals go through their lives and manage to solve their problems. The third discipline aims to teach individuals the classical writings through Latin and Greek. The authors believed that the classics were able to provide the individual with the necessary discipline to form a proper character and to be a gentleman (*Yale Report*, 1828). What was advocated by the authors of the *Yale Report* was what the traditional educators today believe should be the aim of education. They believe that education should provide an individual with a general foundation in all areas that are common for all but not for one specialized profession.

Many scholars accept that general education movement started in the 1930s and 1940s (Stevens, 2001). This movement consisted of a group of influential professors and administrators such as Hutchins, Adler, and McKeon. Hutchins, who was the president of the University of Chicago in 1930, was one of the influential scholars who sought to revive the humanities' ideas of liberal education in higher education (Kliebard, 1986). He sought to restore the classics and believed in the importance of teaching the "Great Books." Hutchins criticized universities that only trained students for their jobs (Stevens, 2001) and argued that, through the classics, students would also learn to express themselves clearly and acquire the important skills of effective thinking (Stevens, 2001).

Hutchins believed that education for citizenship meant providing a liberal education (Ehrlich, 1997). Liberal education then meant reading and discussing the Great Books. This idea about the aim of education contradicts the

progressive education philosophy that was active at that time. Dewey criticized Hutchins' view of education. Dewey believed that "the goal of education is not intellectual inquiry for its own sake, as Hutchins proclaimed, but the betterment of democratic practice across the whole of American society" (Ehrlich, 1997).

The debate over general education in higher education continued until the release of the *Harvard Committee Report* in 1945, which is commonly known as *The Red Book*. The report discusses the need to have general education at the college level. General education, as Harvard's committee defines it, is "that part of a student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen." The Report agreed that "specialism is the means for advancement of our mobile social structure; yet we must envisage the fact that a society controlled wholly by specialists is not a wisely ordered society" (*Harvard Committee Report*, 1945). The Harvard committee points out that both specialized education and general education are important in the modern world to be able to fulfill the requirements to be a doctor or an engineer. However, the question is how we can save general education and make it part of the education process for students in a system where specialism becomes a necessity.

The authors of the *Harvard Committee Report* proposed a general education program for undergraduates. This general education program included three areas: first, natural science, which helps students understand the physical environment; second, social studies, which helps them understand the social environment so they become able to understand their society and interact effectively with it; and third, humanities, which help an individual understands him-/ herself (*Harvard Committee Report*, 1945). These three areas of knowledge, the committee believed, would help students develop four important abilities: to think effectively, to communicate thought, to make relevant judgments, and to discriminate among values. These personal skills were to be developed as a whole, not separate from one another. The Harvard general education program was adopted by many universities across the country because the *Harvard Committee Report* gained wide attention; this attention resulted from the timing of the report's release (Stevens, 2001). At that time, American universities experienced high enrollment due to the massive influx of students returning from the war. Therefore, educators felt the need to "assert the American culture and the democratic values in the aftermath of the threat of fascism and the developing culture of the Cold War" (2001). More efforts were generated to return some of the courses that taught about Western cultures and values.

However, between 1950 and 1970, many universities started to reduce their general education requirements (Stevens, 2001). Many scholars argued that this reduction was a result of several factors. Among these factors were the expansion of the role of university and a shift to an emphasis on research in addition to the growth of new disciplines. Another factor relates to the increasing numbers of students attending college (2001).

In the late 1970s, educators again became interested in general education requirements. This interest was motivated by the sense that academic achievement in American education had started to slip (Stevens, 2001). For example, the College Entrance Examination Board reported a decrease in students' test scores over twelve years. In addition, The Association of American Universities reported a "nationwide increase in student ignorance and illiteracy." Therefore, universities started to increase their own curriculum requirements (2001).

During this revitalization period, many colleges aimed to expand general education requirements to include other subjects, such as teaching about other civilizations, and include women's studies in the curriculum, as well as multicultural studies. As a result, many scholars such as Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsh generated national debate about the orientation of colleges and universities. Both Bloom and Hirsch, the former in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* and the latter in his book *Cultural Literacy*, criticized American colleges for their failure to teach Western culture (Stevens, 2001). For example, Bloom (1987) criticized those who promoted multicultural education and encouraged inclusion of non-Western civilization. He stated that "cultural relativism succeeds in destroying the West's universal or intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving it to be just another culture" (Bloom, 1987).

The interest in general education requirements in undergraduate education continues today. This interest continued because college enrollment kept increasing and included students from diverse backgrounds as well as from other nations. In addition, many educators find that most students come to college unprepared academically and socially. The educators became burdened with the remedial courses they had to teach in math and other basic communication skills to help students compete academically. These kinds of courses resulted in lowering college standards to meet student abilities and needs (Stevens, 2001).

3. Perspectives on General Education

There are three perspectives on general education requirements. Each of these perspectives holds a different view of academic values and what the direction of education should be. These perspectives are: the traditional or the

conservative perspective; the multicultural perspective; and the radical perspective.

First, traditionalists believe that undergraduate education should provide "background knowledge" for all students (Haworth & Conrad, 1990). Liberal arts education advocates argue that if the subject major provides intense professional knowledge for students to be able to participate in the economic and commercial life of their country, then other knowledge is essential to successfully use this professional knowledge (Stark & Lattuca, 1997). The aim of education is neither vocational nor specialist, but rather it is concerned with how we can live right (Newton, 2000).

Liberal education has been identified as "a process through which the whole person is developed, and also, as a type of cognitive immersion in fundamental ways of knowing and in advanced intellectual reasoning skills" (Levine 1978, pp. 3-4, as quoted in Conrad & Wyer, 1980). Liberal arts supporters believe that teaching languages, history, philosophy, mathematics, and old literature will enrich students intellectually and personally. This traditional educational philosophy emphasizes the importance of the classical curriculum for the exercise of the mind and provides a general foundation that is common to all students rather than focusing on specialized education for practical professionals (*The Yale Report*, 1828). These disciplines, they argue, will help students to understand "how men and women of our own and other civilizations have grappled with life's enduring fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? …What is noble? What is bias?" (Bennett, 1984). Furthermore, they argue that the best way to reach these results is through teaching these courses in their original texts, as this provides more opportunity for students to think for themselves and reflect on what they understand from these original materials (Bennett, 1984).

Bloom and Hirsh are two examples of scholars that represent this conservative perspective (Eaton, 1980). Bloom (1987) for example, believed education should focus on the pursuit of intellectual certainty and that it should be for the talented elite (Eaton, 1980). He also questioned the value of the feminist movement and inclusion of non-Western culture in the curriculum (1980). He sought restoration of the Great Book curriculum in undergraduate education. Hirsch in his book *Cultural Literacy* identifies the need to have a shared body of information among all people so they can function effectively. Hirsch's cultural literacy is intended to "describe the information possessed by literate Americans and therefore of value to most Americans" (Eaton, 1980).

The second perspective is the multicultural perspective. The proponents of this perspective believe that in order to enrich students' personal experience, general curriculum requirements should be expanded to include multiple perspectives rather than a single-knowledge perspective (Haworth & Conrad, 1990). They believe that feminism and multicultural perspectives teach students how to think critically, which helps students search for reliable knowledge about the world. The advocates of this perspective believe that someone who thinks critically is able to ask questions, gather information, reason about and judge information, and finally, come up with reliable conclusions about the world.

The importance of multicultural education comes from the fact that it "gives them [students] something that can impart meaning and discipline to their intellectual lives in a general way, and making them both richer as individuals and better informed as citizens" (Nussbaum, 1997). In this view, students have the right to be taught to use their own judgments on what they read or learn about and what is happening around them and not be manipulated by the media or any other sources. In addition, when students learn about different nations and understand where these differences come from, they come to realize that they themselves are not the norm and that the others are not aliens. It helps them recognize that their own tradition "is [not] the only one that is capable of self-criticism or universal aspiration" (Nussbaum, 1997).

Advocates of multicultural education argue that in any culture, people think that their culture is the norm and other cultures have diverged from this normality. Not only that, they think that others who are different in religion, beliefs, or ideas should be guided and taught to be like them; they should come back to the norm (Nussbaum, 1997). In addition, courses that follow the multicultural perspective, educators assert, should teach students that all human beings are confronted with common issues and sufferings such as morality and death; they also make judgments about issues related to food and sex and make plans for the betterment of their society (Nussbaum, 1997). These comparisons make students realize common human problems and understand how individuals and communities have faced their problems (Nussbaum, 1997).

The third perspective seeks to make schools the place where social reformation becomes possible. The educators who advocate this view urge schools to help students to transform their current social practice and create schools in which social and economic justice is valued (Eaton, 1980). These thinkers criticize the failure of higher education to educate students and its focus on producing individuals who can function effectively in the labor market. They argue

that schools today transmit the cultural ideology of the dominant group. School knowledge, they argue, "is instrumental for the reproduction of capitalist social relations and critical to the preparation for hierarchically arranged occupational and class structure" (Eaton, 1980).

These education thinkers aim to create an educational climate that helps those students who have always been marginalized, such as the poor and the minorities, to acknowledge their weakness and empower them to be able to change their current position.

Thus, this third perspective emphasizes the importance of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1992). Critical pedagogy is a teaching philosophy that was introduced by Freire (1970) and developed by Henry Giroux (1980). Giroux was influenced by Freire's theory of resistance. Giroux asserts that curriculum should be understood in terms of the political and social factors that affect the development of curriculum (Bowers, 1992). In the field of curriculum, Giroux adds that "what is necessary is a language of possibility... educators must become transformative intellectuals rather that skillful technicians" (Bowers, 1987). Today, most students do not have a part in deciding what knowledge needs to part of their experiences in schools. They do not share with their instructor, the planning of the course, the methodology used, and decisions regarding the content of the course. Giroux perceives teaching as way to challenge and question the common practices and beliefs. It believes that teaching should not be "limited to transforming knowledge formed around specific objectives, but teaching should address how knowledge is produced, mediated, refused, and represented within relations of power in and outside the university" (Giroux, 1992).

Critical pedagogy as Giroux conceptualizes it is "a form of cultural politics [that] rejects the reduction of teaching to a narrowly defined concern with instrumental techniques, skills, and objectives" (Giroux, 1992). This philosophy rejects the common notions about the relationship between teachers and students. Critical pedagogy also refers to "a deliberate attempt to construct specific conditions through which educators and students can think critically about how knowledge is produced and transformed in relation to the construction of social experiences informed by a particular relationship between the self, other, and the larger world" (Giroux, 1992). For instance, teachers, who believe that students have the right to question what they learn, to talk about their reactions, and to express their opinions should help students practice this right. In addition, during class, teachers should pose questions and encourage students to ask questions about what they think of the readings and what they have learned.

Inside the classroom, critical pedagogy is considered a postmodern teaching model that views teaching and learning as a conversation between teachers and their students (Abrahams, 2005). This theory shifts the power structure of the classrooms to students because this theory acknowledges that students come to classrooms with rich experiences that could be used as a bridge for new learning (2005). In general, many educational theorists believe that critical pedagogy is:

> …an effort to work within educational institutions and other media to raise questions about inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p.50).

When we try to answer the question of what each student should know for the higher education curriculum, one additional perspective becomes important to mention. It has been argued that the "cultural organization" of any institution of higher education determines what kind of curriculum is useful for students (Tierney, 1989). While on the one hand, colleges and universities formally try to impose their values by requiring sets of courses that reflect their ideology, they also informally impose what is called a "hidden curriculum," shaped through the mixture of its beliefs, rituals, goals, myths, language, and ideology (Masland, 1985). Thus, the answer to the question of what every student should know also depends on the mission of the organization.

Today, when a curriculum undergoes certain changes, curriculum developers try to include the important aspects emphasized by the theories described above. Today's curriculum emphasizes efficacy and effectiveness (Hunkins & Hammill, 1994). This means that the curriculum should reflect the students' needs and culture. So if we want to go back to the issue of what defines knowledge, we will find it different from one institution to another, depending on the values held by the institution. That is why we seldom observe standardized curricula in postsecondary education (Tierney, 1989).

The "academic plan" model presented by Stark and Lattuca (1997) provides a helpful understanding of what a curriculum ought to be. This model accommodates all the different perspectives on what we should include when developing curricula. This academic plan provides suggestions on what students should learn, how this could be learned, and how it could be evaluated (Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Because no one plan will be appropriate for all

institutions, this academic plan, as the authors explain, "provides a checklist, or template, that encourages a careful process of decision making" (Stark & Lattuca, 1997).

Stark and Lattuca's academic plan includes seven elements that could be used for designing a coherent academic plan. These elements include purpose, students, contents, instructions, evaluation, and adjustment. They're not only emphasize the importance of student involvement in curriculum making, but also bring faculty together from different disciplines to share and understand different views and work to bridge these disciplinary gaps (Stark & Lattuca, 1997). However, in order to develop a successful academic plan when planning to modify the curriculum, it is important to remember that changing one element will lead to change in the other elements. For example, when faculty want to change a course from a lecture to a discussion-type course, the content and the purpose of the course in terms of subject or the quantity of the materials will change. In fact, this characteristic of the elements of the academic plan makes it an efficient and effective model to use when universities or colleges plan to change their curriculum, because it provides for coherent curriculum change.

4. Conclusion

The paper presents the history of the controversy of what ought to be included in the general curriculum requirements. The presentation shows that the approaches have moved away from the classical and liberal education to more practical approach that fits the current societal changes. It also clarifies that an institution's vision and philosophy determine the values put into these general courses. Today, the focus is on courses that promote critical and creative thinkers, and produce individuals who are aware of the changing world around them. Therefore, when developing curricula, it is essential to recognize that a curriculum is "importantly about students, society and knowledge, and if any one of these components is severely neglected, education is rinsed and all components suffer" (Walker & Soltis, 1997). We have to accept the fact that higher education curricula are culturally constructed. That means that a curriculum is "inherently partisan" (Tierney, 1989). Thus institutions should exert some efforts to identify their students' needs, expectations, and goals in order to develop curricula that meet these needs.

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